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ABSTRACT

The main objective of the program was to obtain qualitative data on the value of Radio Farm Forums (RFF), to both the farmers and the extension service, in terms of facilitating two-way communication between the two parties. The concept of RFF is to provide agricultural information through integrated use of mass media and interpersonal communication channels (radio, publications, field worker visits) for an audience which has been organized into forums. The project was conducted in eight villages in Khon Kaen Province, Northeast Thailand, which were selected (out of 47 villages) by application of the quartile ranking method to existing socio-economic and agro-economic data. A training program was developed for forum leaders from the villages. The RFF were broadcast once a week for 20 weeks, with the leaders conducting discussion periods immediately after each program. The RFF (1) succeeded in organizing groups of farmers and maintaining their interest in the project; (2) demonstrated the reinforcing effects of relaying messages through several means of communication; and (3) illustrated a virtually self-contained model for extension program planning and implementation. (JAB)

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SUMMARY REPORT

on

THE RADIO FARM FORUM PILOT PROJECT

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November, 1976

(Note: This pilot project was carried out by the Department of Agricultural Extension with advisory assistance and financial support made available under the UNDP/FAO project "Strengthening the Programme of Improvement of Irrigated Agriculture in Northeast Thailand, THA/74/015").

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I. INTRODUCTION:

The Radio Farm Forum Pilot Project was established as part of the overall effort to strengthen the existing agricultural extension service in Thailand. The main objective of the pilot project was to obtain qualitative data on the value of Radio Farm Forums, to both the farmer audience and to the extension service in terms of facilitating two-way communication between the two parties.

Studies have been conducted in several other countries to investigate the effectiveness of Radio Farm Forums. The basic concept underlying the use of Radio Farm Forums is to provide agricultural information through integrated use of the mass media and interpersonal communication channels; specifically through the use of radio, publications, and field worker visits, for an audience which has been organized into specific forums for the purpose of discussing the content of the media inputs, and to provide feedback on them. Each forum is conducted by forum leaders previously selected by group members. A crucial element of Radio Farm Forums is the opportunity which they afford to members to exchange experiences, ideas and to participate in internal problem-solving. The outcome of the discussions and any further problems which arise are relayed to extension personnel through post-broadcast reports prepared by the Radio Farm Forum leaders. The farmers are thus not only provided with a means to increase their level of knowledge but also with a channel to communicate with the extension service so that services to meet actual needs of farmers may be rendered on a timely basis. The novel feature of this project lay in the emphasis which was placed on obtaining farmer feedback.

The idea of introducing Radio Farm Forum activities into agricultural extension in Thailand was first suggested in 1968, by the Department of Agricultural Extension (DOAE), in the Ministry of Agriculture and Co-operatives (MOAC). The present Director-General of the DOAE, (then Chief of the Training and Information Section), proposed that preparatory research be conducted in this area. However, as the newly established Department was undergoing reorganization, activities were delayed until 1975, until completion of studies of Khun Pote Choomsri, an Agriculturalist of the Agricultural Public Relations Division of the DOAE. As part of his Master's Degree Programme in rural broadcasting at the University of Tennessee, Khun Pote conducted extensive research on the use of radio farm forums in rural development in other countries. Upon his return to Thailand, he therefore proceeded to initiate, direct and co-ordinate Radio Farm Forum activities for the DOAE at their request.

Khun Pote was assigned to the Northeast Agricultural Center in Khon Kaen Province.

The UNDP/Development Support Communication Service (DSCS) was approached for advisory and financial assistance in the initial Radio Farm Forum activity. As this programme was in line with DSCS objectives and work responsibilities for the FAO-executed project "Strengthening of the Programme for Improvement of Irrigated Agriculture in Northeast Thailand" (THA/74/015), a supplementary project proposal was drawn up (DSCS Documents RB# 303 and RB# 306), and a joint activity was undertaken.

II. JUSTIFICATION FOR THE PROJECT:

The inadequacy of the ratio of Agricultural Extension workers to farm families has long been recognized by the DOAE. One of the implications of this situation is that agents have insufficient contact with the farmers in the area they serve. This severely inhibits their capability to disseminate needed information relating to agricultural innovation and change. This also means that they have little opportunity to assess the farmers' response to given programmes or even to find out about their day-to-day problems.

III. OBJECTIVES OF THE PROJECT:

To conduct an action-oriented research project to study:

1. the value of Radio Farm Forums, to both the DOAE and to farm families, in facilitation two-way communication;

2. the feasibility of introducing the Radio Farm Forum concept into agricultural extension activities in rural Thailand;

3. the effectiveness of the Radio Farm Forum activity in providing a feedback channel from the farmers concerning both their response to extension activities and their day-to-day farming problems.

Should the outcome of the pilot project be favourable, data from the project would provide the basis for planning Radio Farm Forum activities in other regions of Thailand.

IV. DESCRIPTION OF PROJECT ACTIVITIES:

A. Selection of Study Area -- The pilot project was conducted in eight villages on the right bank of the Nong-Wai Irrigation Project in Khon Kaen Province, Northeast Thailand. These villages were selected (from a total of 47 villages), by application of the quartile ranking method to existing socio-economic and agro-economic data. They can thus be assumed to be comparable with respect to relevant social and economic factors.

B. Selection of Listening Groups -- To set up listening groups, appointments were made with all village headmen in order to introduce them to the concept, objectives and procedures of Radio Farm Forums. The village headmen then proceeded to hold meetings with their respective villagers and to invite them to participate in this activity by registering their names with the headmen. Membership was open to all persons, actively engaged in farming, regardless of sex and age.

C. Selection of Radio Farm Forum Leaders -- Following membership registration, members were requested to select the Radio Farm Forum Leaders for each group. This was done through the sociometric technique. Leaders for each of the groups consisted of a Chairman, Vice-Chairman, Secretary and Deputy-Secretary. Roles and responsibilities of each were explained to all members prior to the selection process.

D. Training Programme for Radio Farm Forum Leaders -- A training programme was held for all selected leaders from eight villages. The course was divided into four specific subject areas namely:

1. Concept of Radio Farm Forum
2. Supporting subjects, e.g., group discussion & leadership
3. Demonstration of discussion leadership and reporting procedures
4. Practice of discussion leadership and reporting procedures

E. Implementation of Radio Farm Forum Activities

1. Radio Programmes -- Radio programmes were broadcast for the duration of the pilot project i.e. for twenty consecutive weeks. On the basis of data from a preliminary survey, it was found that the most convenient time for farmers to meet in radio farm forum

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groups would be during the evening. With the cooperation of Radio Thailand, programmes were broadcast from 8:30 - 9:00 p.m. each Sunday.

The content of each radio programme was based upon the written reports from each listening group. The project co-ordinator was responsible, on a weekly basis, for collating all comments and queries and for contacting the appropriate persons/government sectors for assistance in responding to the problems. The establishment of a Provincial Level Farm Forum Committee at the inception of the project was therefore of great importance as it was necessary to suk co-operation from various units, such as the Royal Irrigation Department, the Rice Bureau of the Ministry of Commerce, the Land Development Division and so forth.

Presentation of the content varied from programme to programme in order to develop the most effective method. Examples of presentation styles included pre-recorded interviews with content specialists, taped discussions from listening groups, announcements using male and female broadcasters, farmer's questions with answers, and so forth. Mimeographed sheets based on the programmes and pamphlets prepared by the DOAE were also made available to the farmers in their forum groups.

2. Listening Groups -- Discussions in all of the groups followed each programme broadcast. The content of discussions, based primarily on the radio programmes and literature, also included the farmers' comments on practical applications of the broadcast information in their own areas/villages.

In fact, the development of the internal problem-solving capability-may perhaps be regarded as a crucial element in this form of group activity. Those problems and queries to which solutions could not be found at the village level, were then referred to the extension agents in the form of weekly post-broadcast reports prepared by secretaries of each group.

3. Follow-up Activities -- Upon receipt of the reports, the extension officer collated all the material. Contact with appropriate persons and/or government bodies would then be made to request assistance in providing timely feedback to the farmers' queries and problems. This was be accomplished through one or more of the following channels:-

3.1 Mass media: radio and publications

3.2 Group contact: field trips to observe demonstration plots, to purchase seeds, to Universities to Research stations; short seminars; film-showing on relevant subjects and so forth.

3.3 Personal contact: visits to villages by DOAE field staff or other specialists who could respond to particular needs of farmers

F. Evaluation Methodology -- The evaluation of the pilot project was designed as an integral part of project activities. It was intended that data be collected throughout the life of the project on different aspects such as administrative feasibility at all levels, effects of Radio Farm Forum groups on social and economic conditions and so forth. A number of methods were used to collect this evaluation data such as weekly Radio Farm Forum reports and attendance records; follow-up visits to villages; observation of group activities; project staff monitoring and observation notes; surveys of Radio Farm Forum leaders and members; surveys of Provincial level committee members; post-project seminar with group leaders and final presentation to DOAE (for details on this methodology see DSCS document RB# 306).

G. Project Personnel and Funding -- For the duration of the pilot activity, two persons were assigned to work on the Project on a full-time basis, namely the Project Co-ordinator from the DOAE and a DSCS Field Assistant. These persons were responsible for the overall planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. The DOAE provided additional staff inputs, consultation, and facilities such as transportation for farmers field-trips, accomodation during training and so forth whenever possible. Additional DSCS inputs were provided, upon request, in the form of advisory services in specialized areas such as research/evaluation methodology and training, preparation of specifications for programme production equipment, and programme planning. Advice was also provided in training of enumerators assisting in field surveys. These enumerators were recruited from Khon Kaen University and the Agricultural College in Kalasin.

V. RESULTS:

Analysis of evaluation data yielded the following categories of results or effects:

A. Effects on communication and transfer of information:

1. The two-way flow of information between farmer and extension agent was shown to be greatly improved. The extension agents recognized the value of regular and frequent contacts with the farming population which was required by the pilot project. The frequency of farmers' contact with extension agents was increased as farmers felt that the agents were trying to provide information directly relevant to their perceived needs.

2. Retention of information and overall learning were also considered greatly improved due to the high interest in the content and the reinforcement of messages by the various communication channels -- radio, literature, and field visits by extension agents and technicians.

B. Motivational Effects:

The extension staff and the farmer audience were found to be extremely motivated by the Radio Farm Forum activity. This may be attributed to the following factors taken singly or in combination:

1. From an analysis of the weekly reports from the Radio Farm Forum groups, it was possible for the extension agents to provide services based upon actual needs and requests of the farmers. This in turn led to a greater feeling of job satisfaction among extension staff and more positive reactions from the farmers.

2. The extension officers commented that the regular visiting schedule imposed by the pilot activity gave an element of continuity to their overall work plans.

3. Because the radio programmes were broadcast over Radio Thailand, Khon Kaen, the programmes were received in neighbouring provinces such as Kalasin, Roi-et and Udorn. Though the pilot activity was active in Khon Kaen province only, inquiries were received from farmers in these areas, also. Some of these Farmers requested Radio Farm Forums be set up in their respective villages. Needless to say, this greatly raised the morale of all project staff. In addition, Provincial level authorities in various sectors of the Government expressed great interest in this project.

C. Social effects of Radio Farm Forum group interaction:

1. The high degree of interest in the content of the radio programmes generated in turn great interest in the RFF post-broadcast sessions. Discussions were often both lively and lengthy.

2. The discussions provided opportunities to focus attention and analytical abilities of the members on a) identification of common problems, b) exchange of ideas and problem-solving discussion and c) the screening of problems or questions to be presented to the extension agent through the Radio Farm Forum report. Problems that the farmers sorted out among themselves were not forwarded to the Radio Farm Forum programme planners.

D. Effects on extension programme planning:

The Radio Farm Forum pilot project contains an implicit model of extension programme planning, namely that the agent's work plan and the radio programme content are based on specific questions or problems from the farm clientele that they serve. The Radio Farm Forum is thus a model for de-centralized, locally-based programme planning in contrast to the usual centrally prepared work plans for field workers.

VI. DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY:

The Radio Farm Forum Pilot Project practically and successfully demonstrated three useful strategies for extension work in Thailand: 1) group organization for local-level problem solving; 2) the value of integration and coordination of various channels of communication; and 3) a model for extension planning and programme development.

1. The Radio Farm Forum Pilot Project succeeded in organizing groups of farmers and maintaining interest on the part of the group members over the life of the pilot project. In the post-broadcast discussions both exchange of ideas and discovery of local solutions to problems were encouraged. The successful organization of groups and the focus of the groups on problem-solving discussion are major achievements.

2. The Radio Farm Forum project demonstrated once again the reinforcing effects of relaying consistent messages is through several channels of communication. Perhaps even more important here is the fact agricultural broadcasting was contrary to current practice, used in such a way as to make it relevant to farmers' problems.

3. The Radio Farm Forum project illustrates a virtually self-contained model for extension programme planning and implementation. The Pilot Project shows that de-centralized farmer-based programming is both feasible from the field workers'point of view and desirable from the farmers'point of view. This model has many implications for the DOAE which should be explored at the policy level.

Several issues relating to Radio Farm Forum require further study and evaluation. It should be noted here, however, that one lesson of the Radio Farm Forum project was that the DOAE's capacity to monitor and evaluate its own programmes is insufficient. Major inputs for both evaluation methodology and costs of evaluation were supplied from DSCS. The Department's overall evaluation capability needs to be strengthened, especially at the field level.

Among the issues requiring further study, immediate attention should be given to an evaluation of the cost effectiveness of the Radio Farm Forum approach, especially in relation to existing staffing and programmes and to planned staffing and programmes under the new National Agricultural Extension Project. Another major topic for review, both at the policy level and in practical administrative terms, is how Radio Farm Forum can be integrated into existing extension activities and programmes, especially in areas where many activities are underway. Here practical questions about pre-existing farmers' groups and cooperatives; farmer leader programmes; differing population densities; intensive staff input required, and soon, must be faced along with the policy questions as to the use of Radio Farm Forum as a programme development model for the DOAE in Thailand.

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